

Gendered Subalterns in Mahasweta Devi's "The Hunt"

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Abstract: *Novelists and Writers since time immemorial have been instrumental in mirroring the plight of subordinated and exploited classes. Literature is the genre through which writers since the inception of civilization have emphatically highlighted the current problems of the day. Through this research article a sincere attempt has been made to understand the problems and the struggles of tribal women with particular focus on Oraon women. Mahasweta Devi was a revolutionary in the sense that her writings are bold indictment of society that uses custom, religion and even brute force to keep women subjugated. The struggle of Mary, the protagonist in "The Hunt" immortalizes the struggle for survival of tribal women in particular and women in general.*

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India's indigenous tribes are located in the lowest strata in the strictly demarcated caste society. According to Mahasweta Devi, "the struggles of decolonization are fundamentally cultural and there exists a tension between the myths and rituals of the indigenous tribes and the pervasive modernity of national bureaucracy and multinational capitalism that penetrates even the most remote regions of the Indian subcontinent" (qtd. in Hegglund 1). The tribal women both in pre and post independence period have been given insufficient recognition. The traditional image of Indian womanhood, whether the socially-secure and independent image of Aryan woman or the sheltered and protected image of the purdah-clad medieval woman, does not include the grim realities that constitute the life of tribal women.

The subordination of tribal women operates at various levels, the first among which lies in the very terms of discourses which are decidedly mainstream. The traditional notions associated with women's role, their social position and responsibilities, their privileges - economic, political and sexual - are determined and judged from the dominant cultural perspectives which are opposed to the ideals of tribal traditions. "The tribal women's independence, for instance, is misread so very often as frivolity or even immorality, her resourceful handling of nature is seen as witchcraft and her fearlessness is translated as a criminal bent of mind. Obligated to face the double jeopardy of being women and also tribal, the tribal women have to content with images one of which presents them as "bright and comely" but "hopelessly immoral" (Yadav 157).

Mahasweta Devi provides representation to the subaltern women within the socio-political domain of the nation, where the impact of materialism and greed intrudes into the mental and physical geography of the margins that is the poor and exploited tribal women. In her acceptance speech at Raman Magsaysay award, Mahasweta Devi says, "My India still lives behind the curtain of darkness, a curtain that separates the mainstream society from [the] poor and the deprived. But then why my India alone? As the century comes to an end, it is important that we all make an attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and see our true faces in the process" (qtd. in Tiwari

1). Women's writing has emerged and evolved as a result of socio-cultural conflicts that originated in nineteenth century India. The women emancipation is a matter of much upheaval both globally and locally and in India the reawakening of women is an outcome of the efforts of reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891). They declared women morally superior to men and took recourse to the Vedic era, also called the Golden Age of Hinduism, during which women were believed to be possessors of *shakti* (energy/power) and deified as Durga (protector), Kali (destroyer), Laxmi (nourisher) and Saraswati (creator). Women during this period commanded respect from family and were on the same platform as that of her consort, thereafter, a change occurred with which started the process of degeneration of women at all levels of life. The depiction of tribal women's predicament serves as a corollary to the status of women in India. The study becomes imperative due to the fact that women are the pillars of mankind, comprising almost half the population of human race, and the different facets of their socio-economic life play a landmark role in their destiny. *Manusmriti*, Chapter- IV Shloka 27 and 28, states, "Man cannot make any progress, if there be no women standing by his side ready to cooperate with him in all his activities. Man's power lies dormant so long as he is not touched by the spark of women's love and affection. The wheel of the world cannot move in the absence of women." Despite women being the bedrock of society, they are subjected to repression, marginalization and exploitation at the hands of men for centuries.

Mahasweta Devi examines the deep rooted prejudices of race, class and gender and envisages to bring the spirit of egalitarianism among human beings so as to achieve a holistic development of the tribals. As a subaltern class, women demystify the idealized notions of womanhood and proclaim themselves as makers of their own destiny. The tribal world finds space and voice in her works, specifically the inhabitants of the Palamau district of Bihar, which she considers to be the "mirror of India." The present chapter focuses on representation of tribals in general and tribal women in particular in select short stories by Mahasweta Devi as abject beings - exploited, tortured, humiliated, manipulated and raped by the rich institutions and protectors

of law. Here, Devi clearly makes a shift in the general perspective about subaltern women by presenting them as decisive and assertive women whose belief system does not allow them to accept and adhere to the ideology of violence, death, and destruction. Rather than adhering to the feelings of helplessness and misery due to their victimization, they bounce back with greater vigour against the perpetrators of violence. The selected short stories are eye openers as they present tribal women's non-conformity to stereotypical roles, patriarchal boundaries and internal colonialism.

In these stories, Devi exposes the legacy of violence in the lives of tribals, particularly tribal women, as victims of sexual oppression, economic exploitation, the politics of gender, class and caste at various levels. Usha A. rightly says that she, "like a subaltern, is scrupulous in her consideration towards women. In other words she does not regard women as a separate entity but treats their subordination as linked to the oppression of class and caste. The women characters in her works are stronger when compared to men ... She stands with few equals among today's Asian writers in the dedication and directness with which she has turned writing into a form of service to people" (50). She is committed to highlight the sufferings of dispossessed and downtrodden tribals pushed to the periphery and conveniently forgotten as a part of humanity at the hands of the non-tribals. Her stories are a study in brutality and degradation wrought on women for centuries. She narrates horrific tales of women forcibly imprisoned in stereotypical assumptions of womanhood perpetuated through patriarchal ideology and also documents women's reprisals against subjugation which become the means of potential emancipation. After undergoing consistent degradation at personal, socio-economic and political levels through physical, emotional and psychological rape, her tribal woman transforms herself from a victim to a subject position with the courage of her convictions and brings about metamorphosis in her life. "The Hunt" maps the experiences of the Oraon tribals (particularly of a tribal woman) and tribal life in post independent times. It is a social portrait of the contemporary transformation of gender roles and relationships that tribal women are undergoing in everyday life. It is a story of daring attempt at one's search for identity, self preservation and resistance of women in the tribal forest land. The traditional festival of Janiparab (the festival of justice) provides a base for the cultural ethos of Oraon women. This celebration becomes important to identify the accepted or rejected gender roles because men and women have the opportunity to socialize demonstrating the power of sex and gender as, "for people who live in villages like Kuruba, life holds few breaks other than animal festivals" (2). This activity shows that society is regulated by the male worldview, that is why, the speaker states that women "don't know why they hunt for a thousand million moons on this day" (12). The social celebrations constitute some of the best spaces to perform as per cultural standards and restrict the performative scope of men and women but at the same time provide possibilities of gender subversion in certain social activities. Mary Oraon is partly a tribal girl, an illegitimate daughter of tribal mother and Australian father, but in her attitude and values she is tribal to the core. Unlike other Oraon girls she has a light copper skin, flat features, tall built, and always wears a sari. Physically she is very

attractive but there is "a strong message of rejection in her glance" (2). Her colour is a reason for her not being accepted in marriage in her own tribe. She is liked by village society as she is very talented and stands by her values for, her life is not just for living but for living meaningfully. She has special liking for soap, oil and clean clothes. She believes in sanctity of marriage and unlike other tribal girls, she has never been to Jalim's room and does not wear clothes that Jalim has given her, she is determined to wear them only after wedding. Mary knows that Tehsildar Singh's sexual advances may prove fatal for her marriage, if Jalim comes to know of the latter's evil eye on her, he would surely kill him.

The noteworthy fact is that a tribal or for that matter any woman has an inherent sense of self respect and self esteem. The very origin of Mary has been a source of hurt for her as her Australian father has cheated her mother. She yearns to be completely associated with her tribe who has reservations in accepting her. Mary, unlike other tribal girls has a razor sharp brain, an inviolate constitution and infinite energy that makes her reject the Oraon men for marriage as she feels that their life style denotes wants and indiscipline, she emphatically says, "No, living in a shack, eating mush, the man drinking, no soap or oil, no clean clothes. I don't want such life" (3). There is a rebellious trait in her and she wants to do away with every unjust act. "In her inmost heart there is somewhere a longing to be part of the Oraons. She would have been very glad if, when she was thirteen or fourteen, some brave Oraon lad had pulled her into marriage" (5). To be rooted in one's roots is a natural instinct in every human being as exemplified by Mary's yearning. However, her attempts are thwarted by the patriarchal mind set of the Oraons as they don't think of her as their blood and don't place harsh injunctions of their society on her. She would have rebelled if they had done so, "Mary as an empowered gendered being, lives her life on her own terms and she makes her fellow tribals aware of the ways of the world" (Soumen 102).

The colonialist mindset of having right to exploit tribal women for physical satisfaction reigns supreme here. Nevertheless, Mary's unique personality becomes the medium to mock at the sexual advances of the mainstream forces embodied in the character of Tehsildar Singh. She uses the traditional tribal myth of Janiparab as a symbol of resistance. Traditionally, hunting has been an activity performed by men and it also embodies a hierarchical relationship between the prey – the weak object as the award – and the predator (the strongest) whose mental, physical and cultural capacity gives the possibility to dominate others. Therefore, hunting as a socio-cultural activity has accrued men the chance to historicize their male identity in the premises of strength, power and domination. In "The Hunt", it is revealed that "the ritual of the hunt that the tribes celebrate at the Spring festival is for the women to perform this year. For twelve years men run the hunt. Then comes the women's turn. Its Janiparab. Like men they too go out with bow and arrow. They run in forest and hill. They kill hedgehogs, rabbits, birds, whatever they can get. Then they picnic together, drink liquor, sing and return home at evening. They do exactly what men do. Once in twelve years" (12). The switch over to traditional male roles by

hunt women demonstrates that the qualities related to hunting like sagacity, physical strength, and knowledge about the prey are not exclusively masculine, these can be feminine qualities as well.

Mary is an agent of gender transgression because she is able to act like a man and offer resistance against exploitation. Here differences between men and women are celebrated to showcase that aggressiveness, strength, passivity, weakness, courage, bravery are qualities and states of mind acquired through socio-cultural censorship rather than through sex-caused limitations. Mary's temperamental behaviour and physiological differences become irrelevant as she challenges power politics of male chauvinist society. Thus, the story "embodies a space that is, no doubt, a site of exploitation by and domination of the society but at the same time it is well equipped with an equally strong, subversive agency to topsy-turvy the whole game" (Soumen 102). The fellow tribals and non tribals like Prasadji and others fear her but at the same time look upon her with love and respect. She plays the role of a protector for the villagers and informs them about tremendous profit being pocketed by the forest guard, Tehsildar Singh, at the cost of their trees. She informs Prasadji about the embezzlement by Tehsildar Singh and says firmly, "The bastard tricked you. He took all the profit" (9) and advises him to refuse prices for the trees. She motivates fellow tribals to be active in bargaining for the rightful price for their trees. Thus she becomes the protector reversing the traditional role assigned to women in patriarchal society. Mary assumes the responsibility of a care taker for Jalim also. She saves money for him as she knows that Jalim "has his parents, brothers, and sisters in the village. Here he will have to rent a place, buy pots and pans, he won't be able to carry on the expenses" (4). The society does not impose harsh injunctions on her because of her hybrid origin and she suffers from a sense of alienation and yearning for moorings. She is hardworking, smart and deeply in love with Jalim, gifts him a coloured cotton vest and she herself saves about ninety two rupees for marriage. She is committed to protect Jalim from the forest guard as "Tehsildar has a lot of money, a lot of men. A city bastard. He can destroy Jalim by setting up a larceny case against him" (12-13). Thus she can apprehend how law can be used for demeaning and destroying the tribals. Her reaction to Tehsildar's sexual advances goes beyond her tolerance as she firmly believes that, "Among the tribals, insulting or raping women is the greatest crime. Rape is uncommon to them. Women have a place of honour in tribal society" (Devi, *Imaginary Maps* xi). It is this fact which makes Mary catapult the sexual act and have consensual sex with Tehsildar Singh converting it into a victory and thereby subverting the stereotyped gender role proclaimed on women. Mary's machete is a symbol of her power to protect her and others; for instance, Mary maintains her right of picking the fruit of four Mahua trees on Prasadji's property by using her machete, therefore, "no villager has been able to touch the fruit even in jest" (4). It is largely due to her economic independence that she asserts and protects herself from subordination and exploitation. She transgresses from the traditional gender identity and involves herself in activities considered as demonstrations of masculinity like pasturing and farming. She pastures Prasadji's cattle and is the most promising cowherd. She also sells custard, apple

and guava from Prasadji's orchards and succeeds in getting hard bargains from the wholesale fruit buyers. In her ability to do jobs involving physical effort she emerges as a powerful subversive character.

Mary cleans house and pastures cattle with her inviolate constitution ... infinite energy, and ... razor-sharp mind. On the field she lunches on fried corn. She ... oversees picking ... weighs the stuff herself for the buyers.... When the rain comes she replants the seedlings carefully. She watches out for everything ... buys rice, oil, butter, and spices for Prasadji. (4)

The story is a powerful attempt to interrogate the subservient role of women in society by reversing the traditional victim position for avenging injustice and oppression. Women are usually seen more as flesh and blood than hearts with independent minds. Mary's beauty excites the lust of Tehsildar Singh who visits her village to buy logging rights, he pursues her relentlessly with his tireless single-minded pursuit. She is steadfast in her attempts to stop him and does not give up and retorts emphatically, "You look like a monkey ... Brokers like you, with tight pants and dark glasses, are ten rupee on the street of Tohri, and to them I show this machete. Go ask if you do not believe me" (9). He is further infuriated by the fact that an ordinary girl can reject him for an inconsequential Muslim boy. Mary finally invites him on a rendezvous during annual Spring festival, Janiparab or "the festival of justice" to a secluded place deep in the forest and thus thwarts the attempts of Tehsildar Singh by hunting him on the day of the great hunt. Symbolically she is the one who kills the biggest beast of the jungle and solemnizes the blood ritual. "In the women's gathering, Mary drank the most wine, sang, danced, ate the meat and rice with the greatest relish. At first everyone mocked her for not having made a kill. Then Budhni said, look how she's eating? As if she has made the biggest kill" (16). Mary emerges as a powerful voice of gendered subaltern by grabbing the dominant place. Devi, through this story aims at transgressing the norms and by subverting the patriarchal boundaries she exhibits an assertion of sexuality by women rather than being just passive and eternal victims.

After the big kill, she quietly leaves to be with her fiancé Jalim, from where they intend to escape to some faraway place and "she looks back to find the Spring festival fires ... scattered in the distance. She is not afraid, she fears no animal and she walks ... Today all the mundane blood-conditioned fears of the wild quadruped are gone because she has killed the biggest beast" (17). This event according to Devi has been inspired by a true story and thus reflects how a ritual was used as a weapon for contemporary resistance. Mary's "act of killing her ardent suitor and sexual harasser, the wealthy logger, Tehsildar Singh, from the city, is a clear statement of transcending and destroying the patriarchy that is totally corrupt. Moreover, by this very act, Mary challenges the dominant structures of middle class, upper-caste heteronormative femininity and gendered subjectivity. And finally Devi merges the ritual of the tribal women's hunt with Mary's murder of her suitor, suggesting

that indigenous practices still provide a fertile ground for myths that can be deployed to combat contemporary oppressions” (Singh, Madhu 91).

“The Hunt” marks the victory of subaltern woman in the form of Mary Oraon speaking against the victimization and oppression on the basis of sex. She imparts voice to the people who have faced centuries of subjugation from external as well as internal colonizers. She is the subaltern speaking and hers is the voice of resistance emphatically saying no to her oppressors. According to Spivak in *Imaginary Maps*, “this voice of resistance makes Mary an organic intellectual.... Mary Oraon in „The Hunt” is one of these figures” (xxvi-xxvii). According to Mahasweta Devi this act by Mary “resurrected the real meaning of the animal-hunting festival day by dealing out justice to a crime committed against the entire tribal society” (xi). Devi supports this resistance on the part of Mary as “profound ecological loss [in] complicity of local developers with the forces of global capital” (201). Mary’s rebellion is a potent assertion of resistance against gender politics and an attack on the “incursion upon the tribal land and forests by feudalism, colonialism, and global capitalism. As a result, the subaltern figure of Mary Oraon becomes a metaphor for tribals and marginalized people all over the globe” (Singh, Madhu 91).

The exploitation of forest resources that goes on in the name of development is an important feature of the story. In the introduction to the story, Mahasweta Devi says, “Once a tribal told me, I need five rupees a day to buy rice. Ask me to fell a tree, I’ll do it unwillingly, but I’ll do it. Ask me to chop a head, I’ll do it, because I need five rupees at the end of the day. So that the hands that fell the tree are not the hands responsible for the deforestation all over India. Big money is involved in the furniture that you see in Delhi, or Hyderabad, or Calcutta. The local political worthies, local police, local administration are bribed ... All over the world Governments protecting the environment is nonsense. Thus through Mary Oraon I have narrated events that are true of India today” (“Author in Conversation” xii). It is thought provoking that the village of Kuruda connected by a railway line is nevertheless declared as abandoned as train merely slows down at this station to finally stop at Tohri which is coal halt as well as Timber and Sal growing region. Mahasweta Devi is an activist first, and for her, “art is intervention, an act of retrieving the corpses from beneath the apparently charming-looking national spots as well as of visualizing a better, more humane nation” (Jaidev 52) and her mission is to shake the masses out of their complacency. Kuruda is still unexplored and untouched, Tehsildar Singh, the forest guard, is the first in line of non-tribal outsiders who are just waiting to pounce on Kuruda’s forest resources. In the name of development plans are made in a sly and subtle way to take away the livelihood of indigenous tribal people whose life revolves around these forests. Ironically, these unsuspecting people are the ones to provide cheap labour for their own undoing. Mary tries to persuade the Kuruda elders not to provide cheap labour: “Twelve annas and eight annas! No porter carries a gentleman’s case for this price” (12). Unfortunately her protests and warnings are not heeded, she warns that in case Kuruda’s forest reserves are discovered by the outside world it would start the

process of developing an infrastructure for easy transportation of timber that is waiting to be cut. Thus it can be safely assumed that Kuruda will not be abandoned for very long, sooner or later in the guise of developers, relief workers, contractors and government officials will enter with a promise of economic development and integration of the tribals into the mainstream.

Land is the most valuable and imperishable possession for the tribals, from which they derive their economic sustenance, social status and a permanent means of livelihood. In addition, land also assures them identity and dignity and creates conditions and opportunities to achieve social equality. An equitable distribution of land is a lasting source for peace and prosperity that can guarantee economic social justice in India. With this aim in view in the village of Kuruda there is a government regulation that if there are mahua trees on any persons land in the forest areas, the right to the fruit goes to the picker. The tribals use mahua for making liquor, washing soap, and for eating fruits as well. The land ceiling laws are not implemented here, and Prasadji has two hundred and twenty five bighas of land, and it is non-tribals like Prasadji, Lalchand, and Lachhman Prasad who have grabbed a large chunk of tribal land and pocket huge profit from Sal trees.

The Oraons’ life is marked by subtle exploitation and is neo-classical in manifestation. There is internal colonization going on in the name of progress leading to catastrophic ecological loss. The forest guard Tehsildar Singh himself fells Sal trees for profit leading to barren land, environmental degradation and devastation. The tribal people, the original inhabitants of land whose lives are intrinsically bound up with the forest, have no say in the matter. Ironically they become coopters and help these internal colonizers by providing them cheap labour. Thus there is gradual and systematic annihilation of tribal culture and the illegal deforestation in the name of development. “The pre-colonial kings ... and the exploitative colonial masters take the form of rapacious middlemen and contractors. Tehsildar Singh, with the aid of Prasadji’s son Banawari, tricks the innocent tribal people ignorant of the market value of the full grown Sal trees. They manage their ... cooperation in the timber felling mission. Even he purchases their labour in exchange of less than minimum wages” (Soumen 103). Not much has changed for these tribals in postindependent India for in place of white imperialists there are indigenous ruthless landowners, crafty merchants and corrupt government officials who carry out a systematic destruction of forests which have been home to them for centuries.

The Oraon tribal society is marked by the values of equality in community, collectivity in economy and deep faith in their ancient tribal values of cohesiveness suggesting harmony between community and environment. The encroachment of tribal lands guided by mercenary interests of outsiders does not stop at environment destruction, it destroys the whole way of life. An instance of this is the system of Dhumkuria, the youth dormitory. The youth especially boys are branded on the arm before their entry into this institution. They have a rich range of folk songs, dances and tales as well as traditional instruments. Both men

and women participate in dances which are performed at social events and festivals. The major customs among the Oraons are connected with birth, marriage and death. The linkage of customs with the ecology is best reflected in customs connected with marriage and death. There are many customs preceding marriage which are closely connected with the environment. There is a custom of men going to the forest to fetch firewood and women to fetch Sal leaves for preparing cups and plates. The preparation of marriage mats and marriage baskets of various sizes are other customs. Jalim, Mary's suitor, although a Muslim relentlessly works and saves money to meet marriage expenses as he wants to really do things which can make her happy. In this way one finds that the Oraons are striving for better future for themselves despite the evil lurking in the form of the likes of Tehsildar Singh.

Devi's strong belief is that resistance to exploitation is essential, and this resistance erupts in the festival of justice which hunts down the biggest beast, a threat to the land and its people. Rightly it is said that these indigenous practices and myths "can still prove to be potent missiles that can be deployed to combat contemporary oppression. The story thus becomes a celebration of traditions that is compellingly relevant in contemporary times as well" (Gupta 24). The need is to empower and promote the socio-economic development of tribal women through awareness and education.

"The Hunt" underlines the significance of the act of violent protest as opposed to silent submission. It is a bold indictment of society that uses custom, religion and even brute force to keep women subjugated. Mary combats biological and socio-cultural delimitations about polarized gender identities. "Mary, as a cultural agent, evidences how hard it is to support gender differences based on the superior and the inferior categorization. Instead she demonstrates the inconsistencies of patriarchal societies where gender stereotypes and limitations are mostly a socio-cultural and economic state rather than a divine or biological condition" (Karla 55). "The Hunt" portrays the revolt of Mary Oraon who with her inviolate constitution inflicts punishment on her potential rapist Tehsildar Singh from mainstream society by converting ritual into contemporary resistance.

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